

Teaching and Learning Reading Skills through Play

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ABSTRACT This action research analyses how play in early childhood education enhances early literacy skills among preschool learners and improves the teaching strategy for educators. Play as part of early childhood education has the potential to provide preschool children with highly engaging and meaningful context for learning reading and being successful in early literacy concept. Through play, a child strengthens language development. The participants in this study were preschool teachers in one of the prominent private preschools at Motheo district, Free State province in South Africa. Quantitative and qualitative studies were both undertaken. The study shows that teaching and learning through play can enhance a child's language development and reading abilities. Results indicated that teaching and learning through play sustains children's attention span and develops their reading skills. Undoubtedly, play has significant advantages for children that include fostering reading ability and sustaining their interest in reading and literacy.

INTRODUCTION

There are so many advantages that result from playing activities in as far as teaching and learning is concerned. Play is a very important part of a child's life. Children learn to make sense of the world around them through play. Moyles (2005) states that play offers the best learning experience and remains a priority in early childhood education. Children also learn by playing with peers. Play allows children to express themselves and learn how to work with peers. Through play, children develop social and cognitive skills, mature emotionally and gain the self-confidence they need to try new activities and experience new concepts. As children explore their world, they form and reform new ideas in their minds. The more actively involved children are in their world, the more knowledge they will gain.

Children learn best when they can act on the environment and construct knowledge for themselves. Play helps children to 'weave together all the elements of life as they experience it' (Almon, 2004: 1). Activity time for play can provide an effective learning experience for children and help them gain knowledge. Children learn to communicate and to think during play. Through play, they face problems and see different ways of doing something to solve the problem. Children will express themselves more naturally, easily and spontaneously through a fun-based activity called play (Dutta, 2005). Play was Piaget's idea to explain how children learn through action.

Play is also important for healthy brain development. Research shows that play helps develop brain development by stimulating the brain through the formation of nerve cells. Studies have discovered that rats raised in a stimulating environment have bigger brains and are able to find their way through mazes more quickly. It is likely that human brains respond to play and exploration in similar ways (Dewar, 2008). Play allows children to be creative while developing their own imaginations and it is important to healthy brain development (McNamee, 2010).

It is through play that children engage and interact in the world around them. Sustained attention improves also during play (Berk, 2008). Play engages the child actively, so the child can learn by doing, 'manipulating and moving' (Arce, 2000: 14). In the simple act of play, children discover new ideas. Some of the basic concepts are derived through play, Vygotsky (1967) as a theorist

strongly explained that through play, children learn skills for how to control their bodies, develop communication and thinking skills and learn how to relate to others in a social environment.

Language is a social concept that ‘develops through social interaction’ (Arce, 2000: 16). A child’s intellectual development is crucial to that language development. Play gives children opportunities to learn language from their peers and practice what they have learned in different scenarios. By interacting with peers and their environment, a child develops language skills. Vygotsky’s theory of language suggests that children acquire knowledge as a result of engaging in social experiences. Given appropriate help from adults, a child learns how to carry out a task alone and successfully. Vygotsky (1978) refers to what children can do on their own as their level of development or Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Their full development during this ZPD depends upon interaction the child has while taking advantage of adult assistance.

Vygotsky’s language theory is in opposition to Piaget’s theory of language acquisition. Vygotsky suggests that the social nature of language learning, emphasizing the environment within which a child is raised. By contrast, Piaget stresses language development as being related to cognitive development. Piaget suggests that the development of child’s thinking determines how that child will speak and what the child will say. For example, before a child can say ‘my apple is bigger than your apple’, he or she must develop the ability to judge differences in size. In the Piaget (1962) view, children construct knowledge through a complex process of assimilation, stressing the inherent capability of a child’s brain to adapt and grow through stimulation.

Learning through play in early childhood is the best foundation for success in formal school. Play in the preschool years has the potential to provide young children with a ‘highly engaging and meaningful context for learning essential early literacy concepts and skills’ (Christie & Roskos, 2009:2). Play also answers the need for ‘preschools to prepare children with early literacy skills that will increase the likelihood of later success in reading’ (Bredekamp, 2004:24). Ward (2008) stated that lots of play at an early age enables children to develop the wide, integrated foundation required for future academic success. In fact, play develops many skills that are necessary for children to later learn to read and write. Children can express their own thinking better as they experience language development through play. Studies reveal that a link

between play and the development of children's language skills indicates that those children who score higher on a test of symbolic play have better language skills in both receptive and expressive language (Dewar, 2008). Phonics instruction indeed is a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling.

Effective curriculum should include developmentally appropriate instruction in early literacy skills and teaching strategies. The need to integrate play in early childhood curriculum has been supported by Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education in South Africa (2001). Therefore, preschool children should be taught through play-based activities. Reading is essential to success in life. However, many teachers themselves lack the knowledge and skills needed to provide high-quality education to young children and teach them how to read. Without this particular knowledge of better teaching approach, determining what is best for children is difficult and perhaps impossible. Ulutas and Aksoy (2009) point out that programme of learning with play significantly improved pro-social behavior.

To learn more about these problems, the researcher began an action research by identifying the issues and challenges from classroom experience that occurred in the respective preschool. It is the reflective process that helps teachers to examine aspects of teaching and learning and take action to change and improve them. The researcher discovered that preschool teachers in the selected school were often unable to identify and implement the most effective teaching and learning strategies that will improve students' reading skills. An activities-based learning approach and solely teach from books instead of using books as a basis. Indeed, teachers do not create activities that support actual book information to make it more interesting.

The objectives of this research are to identify whether play-based activities can help improve the effectiveness of reading skills among preschool children and investigate how teachers learn to manage classroom activities effectively. The purposes of this research are to identify the best way to teach children to read and help preschool teachers to improve their teaching approach and make the learning process more interesting.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a mixed method design and both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain data. Mixed method is a procedure used to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative research to understand the problems identified in the study (Creswell, 2008). The purpose of mixed methods in this study is to explore the problem that relate to both aspects of the approach and do so accurately. Quantitative data was collected through the use of questionnaires. Researcher also used data collected through participants' observation. This pilot test was conducted to test research instrument prior to carry out the main research. The instruments were piloted on a small group of teachers having similar characteristics to the respondents. The pilot test gave an opportunity to the researcher to make amendments to the instruments carried out in the main research.

In this collaborative action research, four preschool teachers were selected as respondents. The researcher provided teachers with six sets of play-based suggested activities to be conducted with 16 preschool learners in a six-year-old group. The teachers were briefed about the activities and were given demonstrations prior to undertaking them. This procedure allowed the teachers to gain more confidence through familiarity with the activities they were given. Teachers conducted the actual activities in the classroom during a six-week intervention. The purpose of these activities was to give young learners opportunities to gain early literacy as well to improve their reading ability by learning in a fun way.

The researcher took the observer's role during intervention. At the end of the intervention, questionnaires were distributed to the teachers. Likert scales were used in the questionnaires to allow answers that range from: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Slightly Disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree. In this study, descriptive analysis was used in the data analysis to measure mean and average. The observations took place at the school. Teachers and learners were observed or participated in the research study. The targeted group for this research was preschool learners in the six-year-old group. The researcher sat in one corner of the classroom and spent 30 minutes observing each activity. Learners were unaware that they were being observed. Data were recorded using paper and pencil.

Activities: A good approach to teaching reading is through play and games that make learning experience fun. Children explore their physical world through their five senses. During the pre-operational stage (2-7) years, Piaget noted that children learn to use language and represent objects by images and words. During this stage, children also become increasingly adept at using symbols as evidenced by their increase in playing and pretending. During this six-week intervention, six sets of play-based suggested activities were given to teachers to conduct with students in the six-year-old age group. The activities were conducted in groups and individually. Children were asked to recognize letters and say some of the sounds and then they were to begin to put those sounds together to make words through activities. Berk (2008) noted that children figure out that letters are parts of words and are linked to sounds in a systematic way, as seen in the invented spellings that are typical between age 5 and 7. These activities provide further reading experience which then act as broadening the experiences related to new skills.

The Details of These Activities Are Explained below:

Bowling: The teacher uses a marker to write syllables on a few empty plastic bottles. The teacher arranges the plastic bottles two meters away from a child. The child rolls the ball toward the correct bottles. The child picks the bottles and identifies the syllable. The child says the sounds of the syllables and forms a word from them. The child then spells the word and says the word aloud. The activity is repeated with another child.

Finger Puppets: Children pick two fingers puppets and put the puppets on their fingers. Each puppet has a printed syllable on it. Children then form a word from the puppets, spell the word and name the word aloud.

Fish Me Up: Children use magnetic fishing rods to fish pieces of fish cards. Each card has a printed syllable on it and a paper clip attached. Children are to fish two cards to form a word from the cards. Children spell the word and then read the name of the word aloud.

Hanging Clothes: Two children hold a clothesline at each end of the line. The teacher asks one child to pick two pieces of clothes and hang them on the clothesline. The child hangs the clothes

side by side to form a word. The child then spells the word and names the word aloud. The activity is repeated with another set of children.

Keep Eggs On Egg Carton: Children select two eggs (ping-pong balls) and form a word from the eggs. Each egg has a printed syllable on it. Children arrange the eggs on egg carton. Children then spell the word and name the word aloud.

Putting On Socks: The teacher uses a marker to write a syllable on every sock. Children then pick the correct socks and put the socks on to form a word. Children put their feet together, spell the word and name the word aloud.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The teacher's Point of View on Teaching and Learning Through Play: Analysis of the results show that 55% of the respondents selected strongly agreed, 33% just agreed and 13% selected slightly disagreed that teaching and learning through play helps improve reading skills among children. None of the respondents selected disagree or strongly disagree. These results show that the majority of the respondents agreed that suggested play-based activities helped them to improve their teaching approach for reading skills among younger children. The average mean for the group of respondents was 44.25. These results show that there was not much difference between the average mean of respondent's answer. Based on the result, most of the teachers had the same point view. They agreed that teaching and learning through play is the best way to teach children to read. They agreed that play-based activities do help to improve reading skills among children.

How Teachers Learn to Manage Classroom Activities Effectively: Analysis of the results shows that 50% of respondents selected strongly agree, 38% selected agree and 12, 5% selected slightly disagree that they have learned how to manage classroom activities effectively. None of the respondents selected disagree and strongly disagree. The results show that the majority of the respondents have learned how to effectively manage classroom activities that develop reading and literacy skills. Teachers learned to organize classroom for creating an effective learning

environment that enhanced literacy skills. Teachers learned to maintain focus on the whole class in order to keep activities organized and to run smoothly. The average mean of the group of respondents was 37.75. There was not much difference between the average mean of the group's answer and the average mean of respondents' answer. Based on this result, most of the teachers have learned how to manage classroom activities effectively after six-week intervention. The suggested activities helped teachers improve their teaching practice. As a result, teachers learned how to better their teaching approach toward building literacy skills in preschool classroom environment. They learned to manage and organize classroom activities effectively through using the suggested activities.

Observation at the school revealed that children were eager to get started with activities. Throughout the activities, children: (1) thoroughly enjoy playing and learning together with peers; (2) were able to recognize letters, say the sound of the syllable and form a word from printed materials and objects; (3) interacted with peers and were able to express their thoughts and; (4) were able to name the words as they spelled the words throughout the activities. The researcher noticed that teachers were able to conduct the activities as instructed. It seems likely that teachers understood how to conduct the activities. Indeed, teachers encouraged every child to take part and supervised them accordingly. Given appropriate tasks coming from the teachers, the children learned how to carry out the activities. The findings also revealed that children concentrated and had sustained attention during the play-based given activities.

Reading is obviously important for students to have success in school. To read well, preschool learners must learn through play-based activities. This research focused on: (1) the teacher's point of view on teaching and learning through play; and (2) how teachers learn to manage classroom activities effectively. Generally, the teachers agreed that children have rich experiences and learned fast through play. Most of the respondents experienced the benefit of effective teaching and felt that their teaching competence did strengthen. The suggested activities were geared toward improving instructional methods in the classroom and thereby helped teachers to meet their teaching objectives. Through such activities, teachers did develop a strong instructional and teaching approach. In fact, during the six weeks of intervention, teachers learned to think further about how to explore effective approaches in teaching reading skills

through use of play-based activities. Nevertheless, they proposed a time change. For example, they needed a longer time to plan the play-based activity exquisitely. According to them, children need a longer time to practice some skills. The teachers also suggested that activities could be adjusted further and combined with other learning areas, such as music, biblical recites and nursery rhymes through the activities.

Preschool curriculum should build learning opportunities directly into play, so that the learning matches the development process. Play environment can directly contribute to literacy development through both an enriched environment and play experience. This research implies that children are naturally curious, active and eager to learn new things and do learn best through play. Preschool students learn to read through the symbols for alphabet letters. Through literacy-based activities children perceive single letter and letter combinations, translate them into speech sounds and the visual appearance of many common words. Children learn how to combine letters and the sounds they represent to make words. Once they have practiced, recognized and say some of these consonant and vowel sounds; they begin to put those sounds together to make words. They also learn how to associate words with pictures or objects they are shown and thus reinforce the correct sound produced by the combination letters. At the end, they are able to identify words in print, construct words and make meaning.

Teachers support is very important during play-based activities. Teachers need to help children learn through a variety of activities that can contribute to all aspects of child development. Teachers also can observe and record their students' progress and plan additional activities for those children who are making rapid progress.

CONCLUSION

A child is a natural player. Play is closely tied to the development of young children and is an important part of developmentally appropriate practices in the early childhood curriculum. Children enjoy learning through play and are able to express themselves and develop their language skills. This study revealed the importance of play and how play can assist children start to develop their reading skills. During the six-week intervention, children were encouraged to

recognize letters, form words, identify words in print and read words through play-based activities. Children also developed language acquisition skills by interacting with peers.

It is clear that play offers developmental benefits for children in all respects. In fact, children should receive even more enrichment activities that allow them to reach their full potential. Every child deserves the opportunity to develop his or her unique potential in their own way. This study found that teaching and learning through play assist to enhance a child's language development and reading abilities. Indeed, most of the respondents agreed that the teaching and learning through play is the most effective way to develop children's language skills and improve teaching methods of preschool educators. The results indicated that teaching and learning through play does sustain children's attention and assist to develop their reading skills.

The way teachers design learning experiences, how they engage children and respond to them, how they adapt their teaching and interactions to the children's background, the feedback they give matter greatly in children's learning. But managing preschool classroom activities is one of the most challenging tasks that teachers have to face. Planning for the activities, being focused and well-organized assist teachers to take control of the classroom. Looking at the needs of each learner and taking notes of times when they need guidance is able to assist teachers run the activities smoothly. As each child learn best at his or her own pace, teacher can allow adequate time for students to focus on the activities.

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